

Guest editors' introduction to special theme issue: Retention, recruitment and placement

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Rationale

This special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* is entitled *Recruitment, Retention and Placement: Progressing the Knowledge Economy*. It simultaneously articulates with, and enlarges the basis of, a previous issue of the journal: *Retaining Attrition?: Investigating the Student–Institution Relationship in Contemporary Universities* (Somasundaram, Bowser & Danaher, 2005). While that theme issue brought together a set of articles concerned with university student retention and attrition, this one juxtaposes that focus with the pre-enrolment and post-graduation processes of recruitment and placement, with a view to considering the implications of their intersections with, and sometimes contradictions of, retention for policy and practice in contemporary universities.

Universities are the lynch-pins of a knowledge economy. They can be viewed on the one hand as a community of scholars – of teachers and learners – and on the other hand as a manufacturing plant producing knowledge workers. Contemporary universities are challenged to achieve economies in processing students while simultaneously maintaining the traditions of scholarship and inculcating the joy of learning to those who pass through their gates. It is difficult, for example, to reconcile those traditions and that joy with the World Bank's (2002) encapsulation of the principal characteristics of *Building Knowledge Economies*, in which universities are intended to be active participants:

Continuous, market-driven innovation is the key to competitiveness, and thus to economic growth, in the knowledge economy. This requires not only a strong science and technology base, but, just as importantly, the capacity to link fundamental and applied research; to convert the results of that research to new products, services, processes, or materials; and to bring these innovations quickly to market. It also entails an ability to tap into and participate in regional and global networks of research and innovation. (cited in Kenway, Bullen & Robb, 2004, pp. 336-337)

As the complexity of society increases, the demands for understanding and dealing with this complexity also increase. In focusing on problems of the moment, it is easy to lose sight of the broader picture, the rich interconnections that make up living social systems. Educational institutions are challenged with disruptive innovation and rapidly changing expectations from their stakeholders. It is therefore timely to bring together a range of perspectives on, and experiences of, the nexus between teaching and learning and the processes for populating the knowledge economy: the recruitment, retention and placement of university students and graduates.

The aim of *Recruitment, Retention and Placement: Progressing the Knowledge Economy* is accordingly to explore the processes of recruitment, retention and placement, steps towards the goal of populating a knowledge economy and to reflect on the possible implications of those processes for contemporary society. The purpose of the theme issue is to transform the binaries of university academic and administrative processes into a multiplicity of frameworks that contributes to scholarship and practice in this complex, multidisciplinary field.

The rationale for this theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* is sevenfold. Firstly, there is a need for robust academic research and debate on the principles and practicabilities of the university's role in populating a knowledge economy (Kenway, Bullen, Fahey & Robb, 2006; Kenway, Bullen & Robb, 2004).

Secondly, there is a need for a stronger integration among the processes of recruitment, retention and placement, activities that are often treated as disparate elements rather than as a continuum. This lack of an integrated approach is understandable, given the complexity of the links among the processes in theory and practice, but it highlights a significant gap in maximising the success of the processes separately and in combination.

Thirdly, there is a need to continue exploring the relationships between teaching and learning and the 'business' processes of managing students. Understanding the relationships between them will help us in researching the character, impact and effectiveness of learning.

Fourthly, the statistics related to recruitment, retention and placement are increasingly used to assess the quality of teaching and learning. Comprehending the processes on which these statistics are intended to report is crucial to resisting overly simplistic or inaccurate applications to policy issues and problems (Danaher, Bowser & Somasundaram, 2007).

Fifthly, the processes of recruitment, retention and placement have always been important, and are if anything becoming increasingly so, in ensuring the income that keeps universities alive. They therefore have a direct influence on institutional survival and sustainability (Simpson, 2005).

Sixthly, the topic is inherently interdisciplinary. Attempting to understand the debate through a single discipline will illuminate only part of the problem. A set of contributions that crosses disciplinary and methodological boundaries is likely to provide a richer understanding.

Lastly, the topic contributes to the continuing debate about the public and private character and funding of universities, and their role in the economic and social well-being of their multiple stakeholders (Harreveld, Danaher, Alcock & Danaher, 2004).

It is through taking up one or more of these abiding concerns that the six articles in this theme issue are intended to contribute to scholarship related to the contested and controversial relationship between contemporary universities and the knowledge economy. Seen from the perspective of the arguments advanced by the authors represented here, this relationship throws into sharp relief the influences on and of recruitment, retention and placement in the context of late capitalism in the early 21st century. It also adds potency and urgency to the age-old questions of what and whom universities are for and of how the relative mix of their costs and benefits should most appropriately be assessed.

Overview

The first article, by Molly Yang from Central Queensland University in Australia, takes up the issue of recruitment of prospective university students, focusing on students from mainland China considering university study in Australia. Yang uses the results of a survey questionnaire with 65 potential students and interviews with 30 current students to argue that the key influences on Chinese students' decisions about studying in Australia are post-graduation migration opportunities, the high quality of Australian higher education and lower tuition fees and cost of living. She contends that Australian universities and their international agents can use these findings to enhance their recruitment activities and outcomes.

The next four articles shift the focus from recruitment to retention. In the second article, by Leone Hinton from Central Queensland University, engages with what is commonly accepted as the crucial phenomenon of first year undergraduate student attrition. Despite the complexities of defining and measuring the phenomenon and of gathering and analysing reliable and valid data, Hinton uses a combination of action research, case study and descriptive analysis to assert that it is both possible and desirable to design strategies to address both the overall incidence of first year student attrition and specific manifestations of it as experienced by particular groups of learners.

Mary McKavanagh and Ken Purnell from Central Queensland University explore in the third article the utility of a set of such strategies at the same institution for enhancing student retention. Part of the Student Learning Journey, the Student Readiness Questionnaire has been developed on the basis of over 1100 interviews with 'at risk' students and involved a trial of its 20 questions, and is intended for use with students as soon as they are enrolled. The goal is to construct profiles of students in order to provide targeted support at times and in ways that are most likely to support and retain students.

The fourth article, by Janet Taylor and Jill Lawrence from the University of Southern Queensland in Australia, also reports on a specific student retention initiative at an institution with a similar history and student profile to those of Central Queensland University. The initiative is AWARE, an online resource and reflective tool for students who have received academic warning and are therefore considered at risk of

potential failure. Like the Student Readiness Questionnaire, AWARE is situated in the students' lived experiences and seeks to articulate with their lifeworlds – including their current and prospective roles in the knowledge economy.

In the fifth article, Dale Trott from Central Queensland University examines the particular needs and contributions of mature age students in his first year undergraduate occupational health and safety course. He traces his co-teacher and his changes to the course in response to the student demographics and a pedagogical emphasis on the development of functioning teams of learners. Despite a number of risks and difficulties encountered as the course evolved, Trott argues that the changes were largely effective at engaging with students' varied circumstances and aspirations, including those of mature age students, and that the latter are more likely to be retained as a result of such changes.

Daya Somasundaram, Ratnajeevan Hoole and Arjuna Somasundaram from the University of Adelaide and James Cook University of North Queensland in Australia, Drexel University in the United States of America and the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, use the sixth article to shift the focus from retention to some of the broader issues associated with student placement post-graduation. In particular, they demonstrate that the knowledge economy in Sri Lanka has been indelibly and permanently shaped by that country's ongoing civil war, and that questions of recruitment, retention and placement must be understood and addressed against the background of that conflict. For example, Sri Lankan university students must negotiate multiple and contradictory roles as current scholars, future knowledge economy workers and potential combatants or their victims.

Finally, John M. Braxton from Vanderbilt University in the United States of America presents his respondent's text as one possible engagement with the preceding six articles. He directs his response at the three crucial and interdependent themes of enrolment management, the external environment and institutional commitment to student welfare.

Thus this special theme issue presents a range of articles portraying issues and initiatives in student recruitment, retention and placement from the perspectives of students, academics and support staff members in Australia, China and Sri Lanka, with the respondent providing an additional view from the United States. "Progressing the knowledge economy" emerges as partial and fragmented rather than holistic and integrated. That is, while there is a growing consensus of the value of conceptualising student progression across the three phases of recruitment, retention and placement as a set of seamless pathways, and while the initiatives reported in this theme issue show considerable promise of contributing to that progression, the field has too many players with complex agendas and interests to admit of easy or simple solutions. Instead the growing diversity of student demographics and modes of provision needs to be matched by equivalent heterogeneity in policy-making and practice around student learning. More broadly, whether "progressing the knowledge economy" is considered a goal to be implemented vigorously or a threat to be resisted with equal vigour depends on the worldviews of individuals and groups within universities and takes us back to the age-old questions of the roles, responsibilities and relevance of those universities.

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